



Save Yourself First: Parenting an Addicted Child

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The next time you travel by air, listen closely to the instructions given by the flight crew before takeoff. When they begin the part about deployment of the oxygen masks, pay careful attention. They tell you, “...*In case of deployment of the oxygen system, place the mask over your face. ... If you are traveling with a child, secure the mask over your face, so you may assist your child with placing the oxygen mask over their face.*” In other words, if there is an emergency, **you have to save yourself first if you are going to be able to save your child.** This same principle applies to parents who have children suffering from the disease of addiction.

How to parent these children isn't something taught in parenting classes. In reality, parenting an addicted child goes **against** what we know and are taught. For instance, parental instinct compels us to protect our children from harm. Therefore, parents of addicted children try to save their child from the *consequences* of the addiction. In reality, this does nothing to address the addiction itself and family members find themselves living from one crisis to the next. Each time there is a new crisis, the parents attempt to “fix” the addiction by trying to minimize or neutralize the consequences. The crisis passes until the next one arrives. This cycle continues a downward spiral for both the addict and the family. Think of this problem in terms of banking. Each crisis pulls more energy, money, and emotion from the parents “accounts.” As the problems escalate, the “withdrawals” soon exceed the “deposits” and they are in “overdraft.”

As the parent of a chemically dependent child, my wife and I engaged in this destructive behavior. For 10 of 14 years of active addiction, we tried to **save our child** from the clutches of this scourge only to realize later that in our quest to save, **we** had sacrificed everything and **we** were now lost. We were left mentally, physically, emotionally, and financially exhausted from our ordeal. One day, we both realized that if our family was to survive, we had to “save ourselves.”

By now you may be asking, “*Are you suggesting it's wrong to help a child who has a problem with drugs or alcohol?*” No, I am not suggesting that; I am suggesting, however, that parents need to equip themselves with the tools needed “to save themselves” to effectively help the addicted child.

Here are some practical suggestions:

- Learn everything you can about the disease of addiction. Knowledge is a powerful weapon.
- Remember, a child's addiction is an illness parents can't "fix or cure."
- Realize this isn't your fault. Addiction in a child **does not** mean you are a failure as a parent nor is it an issue of embarrassment.
- Allowing the child to avoid consequences related to drugs and alcohol only delays the process of recovery and continues the insanity of addiction.
- Allow yourself to grieve. Parents of addicted children go through the stages of the grief process before accepting their own powerlessness over the addiction.
- Begin a program of recovery for yourself. Recovery for parents is just as important as it is for the addicted child. Involvement with a group and/or therapist will provide parents with a path toward restoring sanity in their lives.
- Don't compare your pace of recovery with others. Remember you are working through feelings of grief and everyone works through them at their own speed.

For more information on parenting an addicted child or for information about the TMF's Physicians Health Program (PHP), log on to www.e-tmf.org or call (615) 467-6411.